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When Young Teachers Go Wild on the Web

Public Profiles Raise Questions of Propriety and Privacy

By Ian Shapira
Washington Post Staff Writer
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It's almost like Googling someone: Log on to Facebook. Join the Washington, D.C., network. Search the Web site for your favorite school system. And then watch the public profiles of 20-something teachers unfurl like gift wrap on the screen, revealing a sense of humor that can be overtly sarcastic or unintentionally unprofessional -- or both.

One Montgomery County special education teacher displayed a poster that depicts talking sperm and invokes a slang term for oral sex. One woman who identified herself as a Prince William County kindergarten teacher posted a satiric shampoo commercial with a half-naked man having an orgasm in the shower. A D.C. public schools educator offered this tip on her page: "Teaching in DCPS -- Lesson #1: Don't smoke crack while pregnant."

Just to be clear, these are not teenagers, the typical Internet scofflaws and sources of ceaseless discussion about cyber-bullying, sexual predators and so on. These are adults, many in their 20s, who are behaving, for the most part, like young adults.

But the crudeness of some Facebook or MySpace teacher profiles, which are far, far away from sanitized Web sites ending in ".edu," prompts questions emblematic of our times: Do the risqué pages matter if teacher performance is not hindered and if students, parents and school officials don't see them? At what point are these young teachers judged by the standards for public officials?

In states including Florida, Colorado, Tennessee and Massachusetts, teachers have been removed or suspended for MySpace postings, and some teachers unions have begun warning members about racy personal Web sites. But as Facebook, with 70 million members, and other social networking sites continue to grow, scrutiny will no doubt spread locally.

The annals of teachers-gone-wild-on-the-Web include once-anonymous people who've done something outlandish with a blog or online video. Many people, especially in the Richmond area, remember high school art teacher Stephen Murmer, fired last year for painting canvasses with his buttocks in images on YouTube.

Of course, many of the tens of thousands of Washington area teachers put social networking sites or personal Web pages to constructive uses. Others push the limits.

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Erin Jane Webster, 22, a long-term substitute teacher in Prince William, keeps a page similar to other teachers'. Portions are professional, but some parts suggest the author is in the throes of sorority rush.

Under a "Work Info" heading, the page reads, "Employer: Prince William County Schools. Location: Parkside Middle School Language Arts Teacher." The section lists where she attended college (Radford '07) and high school (Osborn Park High '03).

But the page features multiple "bumper stickers," including one that uses a crude acronym for attractive mothers and another that says: "you're a retard, but i love you."

Teensy problem: Webster teaches students with emotional and learning disabilities. In an interview, she acknowledged her use of "retard" could be misconstrued. The word, generally considered offensive, circulates among some young people as acceptable derogatory slang.

"My best friend, she always calls me that because I say ditzzy things," Webster said. "My best friend and I would never go around calling people that. All of my [students] have emotional disorders or learning disabilities. . . . I love them."

Click "View Photos of Erin," and you can see her lying on her back, eyes closed, with a bottle of Jose Cuervo tequila between her head and shoulder. Or click on her "summertime" photo album and see a close-up of two young men flashing serious-looking middle fingers.

"I know that employers will look at that page, and I need to be more careful," said Webster, adding that other Prince William teachers have warned her about her page. "At the same time, my work and social lives are completely separate. I just feel they shouldn't take it seriously. I am young. I just turned 22."

Like several other teachers interviewed, Webster said she thought her page could be seen only by people she accepted as "friends." But like those of many teachers on Facebook, Webster's profile was accessible by the more than 525,000 members of the Washington, D.C., network. Anyone can join any geographic network.

Local school officials say they have no policies concerning social networking pages or blogs kept by teachers. But they said that online improprieties would fall under general guidelines requiring proper behavior in and outside school and that sketchy Web sites would be handled case by case.

"I hate to think of what's out there. . . . There's so much out there that it's hard to know what's there," said Ken Blackstone, a Prince William schools spokesman. "But as public employees, we all understand the importance of living a public life above reproach."

Officials in many of the region's school districts said they were not aware of any local teachers who faced punishment over content on personal Web sites.

In Prince William, Rich Davila, a real estate company director and the father of a 6-year-old first-grader, said that when he found a substitute teacher's risque MySpace page recently, he complained to school officials and the teacher was eventually removed. School officials said they cannot comment on the teacher's case, citing personnel rules.

The teacher's page includes a painting of a young woman lifting up her dress, exposing her lingerie, and another showing her bare chest. "I felt sick to my stomach when I saw the page," Davila said. "These Web sites are the bars and restaurants of our new era. It's like running into your teacher in a restaurant and seeing them not act appropriately. It's going to come back and haunt him."

Local school officials said they don't necessarily scrutinize Facebook when they conduct background checks on teachers. But in some parts of the country, they do.

"I know for a fact that when a superintendent in Missouri was interviewing potential teachers last year, he would ask, 'Do you have a Facebook or MySpace page?' " said Todd Fuller, a spokesman for the Missouri State Teachers Association, which is warning members to clean up their pages. "If the candidate said yes, then the superintendent would say, 'I've got my computer up right now. Let's take a look.' "

Bree Melton, 22, an eighth-grade teacher at Fairfax County's Robert Frost Middle School, which has students with hearing problems, describes her job on her Facebook page as "rocking out with some deaf kids. it. is. AWESOME."

In an interview, Melton said: "Is my Facebook profile open? I definitely thought I closed [the page] to people. . . . I am absolutely being sarcastic. I don't [use] sign [language] myself, and I am learning so much about it. I was being completely candid. It's awesome working with them." Access to her page was later restricted, effectively withdrawing it from public view.

Teachers caught with inappropriate Web sites could get a suspension for a first-time offense, said Michael Simpson, assistant general counsel for the National Education Association, a teachers union with more than 3 million members. If they can prove that no one at school complained about the page, then they might prevail in a personnel dispute "because there would be no evidence of any real or potential harm to the students or school," he said.

If teachers claim free speech protection under the First Amendment, Simpson said, the U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled that governments can fire employees if their speech harmed the workplace's mission and function.

In some cases, teachers apparently didn't mind that their Web sites were raunchy and public -- at least until a reporter called. Alina Espinosa, a teacher at Clopper Mill Elementary School in Montgomery, had written on her Facebook page in the "About Me" section: "I only have two feelings: hunger and lust. Also, I slept with a hooker. Be jealous. I like to go onto Jdate [an online dating service for Jewish people] and get straight guys to agree to sleep with me."

Asked about the page, Espinosa said: "I never thought about parents and kids [seeing it] before. That's all I'm going to say."

Minutes later, access to her site was restricted.

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